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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000243

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [OSCE](#) [RU](#) [TU](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [GR](#)

SUBJECT: (C) ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE DECRIES RUSSIAN  
ORTHODOX CHURCH INTERFERENCE

REF: A. 08 ISTANBUL 595

[B](#). MOSCOW 689

[C](#). ISTANBUL 72

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and  
(d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and representatives from the Greek Orthodox Church in America have expressed concerns that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), backed by the Russian Government, is interfering increasingly in Ecumenical Church Affairs with the ambition of moving the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to Moscow. On the eve of a protocol visit by new ROC Patriarch Kirill to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the GOT appears to be lending its support to the Russians. End Summary.

[2](#). (C) Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and representatives from the Greek Orthodox Church in America have expressed growing concerns to us about the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) -- nominally subordinate to the Ecumenical Patriarchate according to current Church doctrine -- and Russian Government to influence or interfere in ecumenical issues. In 2008, the late Russian Patriarch Alexei requested permission to appoint a Russian Orthodox priest to the Russian Consulate General in Istanbul, in a position that would provide diplomatic status for the priest. According to Bartholomew, Alexei also asked permission to post a priest to the Russian Embassy in Ankara. Bartholomew denied both requests and noted that at the Russian Embassy "they would be more than priests and would use their diplomatic status and religion for other purposes in the spirit of expansionism and imperialism" (Ref A).

[3](#). (C) Echoing the Patriarch's concerns, some Russian media outlets have forecast new Russian Patriarch Kirill's emergence as a "political tool of the Kremlin" (Ref B). The Ecumenical Patriarch expressed fears to us that the Russian Orthodox Church ultimately will pursue its ambition to take over the administration of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, moving the seat of the Church to Moscow. The current leadership of the Ecumenical Patriarchate feels itself increasingly vulnerable to such maneuverings, as it faces an impending crisis of succession brought on by Turkish government regulations limiting eligibility for the Patriarchy to Turkish citizens and the GOT's ongoing refusal to allow for the re-opening of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki Seminary (Ref C).

[4](#). (C) Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, elected to his position on December 12, 2008, will pay a required protocol call on the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul on July 4. According to Turkish Diyanet vice president Mehmet Gormez, Kirill will perform a mass at the Russian Orthodox Church in Karakoy (Istanbul) and attend a Russian concert hosted by the Turkish Minister of Culture on July 6 before visiting the

Diyanet in Ankara. The invitation to visit the Diyanet had been extended to Kirill's predecessor, Patriarch Alexei, before his death. Gormez asserted that the Russian Church had not really been fully functional in Istanbul because of the "hegemony" of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and admitted the Diyanet was sympathetic toward the ROC's efforts to be free of this "hegemony."

15. (SBU) The Russian Orthodox Church in Karakoy is funded in part by the Russian Consulate in Istanbul and regularly hosts monks, Russian clerics, and Russian migrants. One of the ROC monks assigned to the church in Karakoy, Istanbul, shared that he has never had any problems obtaining a visa for his purpose of work. Greek clerics assigned to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, by contrast, could only obtain three month tourist visas until December 2008, when the MFA granted them year-long work visas.

16. (C) On June 29, an Ankara-based Greek diplomat (Stavros Venizelos, please protect) expressed concern about the GOT overtures to the Russian Orthodox Church. He voiced the same concern mentioned previously by the Ecumenical Patriarch and Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church in America: that Russia would like nothing more than to see the Ecumenical Patriarchate based in the "third Rome" of Moscow. "From what we have seen," he said, "Turkey would be all too happy to see the 'problem' of the Ecumenical Patriarchate removed from its borders." He contended that Turkey's friendship with Russia was dangerous for the GOT, but Turkey's historical paranoia about the Greek Patriarchate "outweighed rational thinking."

17. (C) Comment: The Ecumenical Patriarchate seems to have

ISTANBUL 00000243 002 OF 002

reason to worry about the Russian Orthodox Church's ambitions given documentation of prior comments by Kirill about the role of the ROC. The GOT's potential complicity in these ambitions is of concern from a political perspective as well.

In fact, a GOT decision to open Halki and expand the eligibility for Ecumenical Patriarch to include metropolitans of all nationalities might be an ideal opportunity to reduce what Turkey considers the undue influence of the Greeks over the Patriarchate. We defer to our Embassy Moscow colleagues on the potential liabilities for the GOT of working with a church that appears tightly linked to the machine of the Russian government, even if the current GOT approach could be portrayed as a gesture to expand religious liberties (of the ROC in Turkey).

WIENER